

Missouri nation's most endangered, activist group says

By Bill Lambrecht
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WASHINGTON - The Missouri River is America's longest river, one of its most heavily dammed and one of its most famous thanks to a pair of intrepid explorers.

As of today, "Big Muddy" will have a new distinction, one that Lewis and Clark couldn't have imagined when they departed on their voyage of discovery in 1804.

At least for a year, the Missouri will be known as the nation's most endangered river in the annual ranking by the advocacy group American Rivers.

"The Army Corps of Engineers continues to run the Missouri River to benefit a handful of barges," said Rebecca Wodder, president of American Rivers, in remarks prepared for delivery today. "It is time to prevent species extinction, tap the Missouri's great economic potential for recreation and tourism and meet the modern needs of riverside communities," she said.

The annual list put out by America's pre-eminent river advocacy group draws attention across the country and has been credited with fueling restoration efforts.

Threats to water quality and river wildlife are the main criteria for the listing, but shifting political realities also play a decisive role.

This year, one of those realities is the controversy over the Corps of Engineers, which is under fire for its projects on the Missouri and Mississippi rivers.

Paul Johnston, a spokesman for the corps in Omaha, Neb., said the relatively few barges that travel the Missouri River don't justify American Rivers' criticism of the corps.

"I wouldn't quibble with their numbers," he told The Associated Press. "But what gets lost here is that it's not up to the Corps of Engineers to stop supporting navigation. It's an authorized purpose, along with all the other purposes Congress authorized. It isn't a bunch of guys sitting around a table saying, 'Let's build some dams and straighten this thing out.'"

The Missouri River has made American Rivers' 16-year-old list for eight

straight years but only once, in 1997, was it judged the most imperiled.

The list will be announced this morning at the National Press Club in Washington and at a half-dozen other news conferences around the country. Stephen E. Ambrose, whose bestseller "Undaunted Courage" stands as the definitive account of Lewis and Clark's epic journey on the Missouri River, planned to be on hand in Washington.

Second on the endangered-river list was the Canning River in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, in pristine lands where President George W. Bush has proposed drilling for oil and gas. Next were: the Eel River in California; the Hudson River in New York; and the Powder River, which flows through Wyoming and Montana.

The Mississippi River ranked No. 6, up two spots from last year. American Rivers said that thousands of acres of wetlands along the Mississippi are threatened by two Army Corps of Engineers flood control projects, one of them the St. John's Bayou-New Madrid Floodway plan in the Missouri Bootheel.

Health of river is in hands of new administration

This year is a critical year for the Missouri River as the new administration in Washington makes decisions on dam operations that will affect the river's health for decades.

The corps is deciding whether to change its operating manual for dams so as to implement a "spring rise" in the lower stretch of the Missouri River. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service insists that raising the water level in spring and then lowering it markedly in the summer is the best way to save three species of birds and fish that are nearing extinction.

The corps plans to make its decision late spring or summer.

The Missouri's No. 1 ranking reflects American Rivers' endorsement of the controversial Fish and Wildlife plan, which is intended to approximate the seasonal rise and fall of water levels that built sandbars and triggered spawning by fish. Missouri elected officials ardently oppose the plan, questioning its value while fearing flooding in the spring and losing water to upstream states when water levels are lowered from Gavins Point Dam in South Dakota.

Chad Smith, an American Rivers organizer in the Midwest, said he believes that the river's dubious distinction will focus attention on the coming decision in Missouri and beyond. "Those who aren't aware might know now that the corps is coming out with a plan and that people will have an opportunity

afterward to comment on it," he said.

Denny Ballard, executive director of the Conservation Federation of Missouri, said he doubted that the indifference of many Missourians toward the river that bisects their state will change as a result of a brief burst of national notoriety.

"Missourians have not considered the Missouri River a source of recreation to any large extent for many, many years. It's a river they cross, but that's about it. They don't get on it because if you go out there in your little boat, you take your life in your hands," he said, referring to the swift currents resulting from deep channels dug for barges.